

Firefighter pleads guilty to stealing

By Ben Orcutt (Daily Staff Writer)

FRONT ROYAL — Steven Michael Jones pleaded guilty Monday in Warren County Circuit Court to five counts of embezzling almost \$74,000 in bingo funds from the Front Royal Volunteer Fire Department where he served as deputy chief and was a lifetime member.

Jones, 38, of 427 Duncan Ave., Front Royal, was indicted by a Circuit Court grand jury in August, charging him with five counts of embezzlement and one count of grand larceny from the department between May 5 and June 3, the day he was arrested by Front Royal police.

“Stealing from a fire department is very low,” Judge Dennis L. Hupp said while accepting the plea agreement fashioned by Commonwealth’s Attorney Brian M. Madden and Front Royal defense attorney David A. Downes.

The plea agreement stipulates that Jones will make full restitution of \$73,911 at his July 5 sentencing and that the grand larceny charge be dismissed. Jones remains free pending sentencing after posting \$1,000 bond.

Neither he nor Downes had any comment following Monday’s proceeding.

Jones will be sentenced within state guidelines and will receive some period of active incarceration, said Madden, who has met with the Fire Department’s board of directors twice to discuss the disposition of the case.

“Since then, I’ve been in touch with the business director, but also the president of the board as well, and they are fully aware of the terms and conditions of this plea by Mr. Jones and they are fully supportive of the decisions that were made,” Madden said.

Front Royal Police Chief Ronald A. Ricucci has said the investigation was launched after the fire company filed a complaint on April 15 of last year.

In a criminal complaint, Front Royal police Sgt. Mark Werner says Jones, who was chairman of the bingo committee, was observed on videotape taking \$697 from the fire company’s bingo room safe at approximately 5:43 a.m. on May 27.

In presenting evidence Monday on behalf of Madden, who was preparing for a jury trial, Assistant Commonwealth’s Attorney Nicholas L. Manthos told the court that Jones’ scheme was to doctor records to show that instant-winning bingo games had not been played. Jones would pocket the money, with the records indicating the games had not been purchased.

However, the discarded games were found in the trash, as well as the correct records, Manthos said.

In a signed June 3 statement following interrogation by Werner, Jones says that he embezzled funds for about 3 1/2 years to “pay bills, buy food, and bought other items.”

The method he employed to embezzle the funds, Jones says, was to open the department’s bingo safe and take out the original reconciliation sheet. He would then fill out a new sheet, leaving out “one or two games” that had been on the original sheet.

“I would then take the profit money from the games that I omitted and remove the seal cards from the safe so that the new reconciliation sheet that I filled out would match to the seal cards that were left in the safe,” he says in the statement. “I would then throw the seal cards and the original reconciliation sheet in the trash. I would then place the money that I stole in my pocket and leave the bingo room.”

Jones estimates that he stole from \$400 to \$500 on a weekly basis.

Prior to accepting the plea agreement, Hupp told Jones that the maximum penalty he could face would be 20 years on each charge, for a total 100-year prison sentence. Hupp said he had some concern before accepting the plea agreement due to who the victim is and how much was taken.

But, Hupp said, “It accomplishes a major goal, which is getting restitution for the fire department. You’re getting restitution for far more than what’s been charged.”

R Contact Ben Orcutt at borcutt@nvdaily.com